

\$3.1M grant funds year-round pallet homes in TD

By Neita Cecil
Columbia Gorge News

The pallet-home homeless shelter on city-owned land in The Dalles that was slated to close March 31 will remain open until June 2022 thanks to a \$3.1 million grant won by a local agency.

"We are very excited that The Dalles shelter will be able to remain open," said Kenny LaPoint, executive director of Mid-Columbia Community Action Council, which received the grant.

The pallet home project began last year when the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the opening of the longstanding winter warming shelter at the St. Vincent de Paul offices in downtown The Dalles.

The pallet homes were set to close March 31, since the city made land-use zoning exceptions and authorized the shelter on an emergency basis only for the winter months.

Important to helping the pallet homes stay open past the emergency deadline was a legal opinion by the city attorney of The Dalles which determined the pallet homes were not subject to city land use rules because they are on city right of way.

"Everybody was thrilled to get that opinion," said The

Dalles Mayor Rich Mays. State legislation last year gave cities shelter-siting flexibility for a limited period, and new legislation re-establishing that flexibility appears certain to pass by May, LaPoint said.

MCCAC was prepared to house the pallet home residents in motels until that new legislation passed, but now they will not have to.

The grant will help provide homeless services to Wasco, Hood River and Sherman counties for the next year and a half, LaPoint said.

It will pay for multiple programs at multiple agencies, including regional shelters, housing payment assistance and culturally specific services to communities of color and Native American community members.

The organizations participating in the effort include The Next Door, Nch'i Wana Housing, the Oregon Human Development Corp., Hood River Shelter Services, Bridges to Health and the Mid-Columbia Housing Authority.

"This is a huge win as we work to advance equity and provide housing stability to our most vulnerable community members," LaPoint said in a press release. "I am proud to be a part of this

collaborative effort to serve our community in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic."

The grant was issued through Oregon Housing and Community Services, using federal funds from the Emergency Solutions Grant COVID-19 program.

LaPoint told *Columbia Gorge News* the grant will pay for the pallet homes in The Dalles year-round and for the Hood River pallet shelters for next winter.

He noted the grant application was the highest scoring grant in the 26-county rural region. Because of that, it not only got the full \$1.8 million it initially sought, but became top priority to request more funding, so the grant was awarded another \$1.3 million, LaPoint said.

That additional \$1.3 million included funding to keep the pallet homes operational year-round, he said. MCCAC has also recently purchased a shower/restroom trailer that will go on the shelter site.

His agreement with the city also has the city installing sewer and water to the site so they can plug the shower trailer directly in, he said.

"The funds will also pay for Community Meals to continue providing meal service to the shelter residents. In addition, a portion of the funds

will help provide homeless folks with resources to become rehoused in permanent housing as quickly as possible," he said.

"Our goal when someone enters shelter is to help get them into permanent housing and prepare them for that by providing wraparound services and supports," he said.

LaPoint told The Dalles City Council last week that the pallet homes have served as a "center for safety and stability for our most vulnerable community members during the difficult winter months we experience here in the Gorge."

The pallet home project has 18 homes, which can hold two people each.

The shelter has also provided an "opportunity for transition and hope for the future," he said.

Since MCCAC took over managing the shelter in February, it has worked to connect shelter guests to other programs including behavioral health, medical and permanent housing opportunities.

So far, seven shelter guests have transitioned to permanent housing, five obtained steady employment, and four are currently attending post-secondary education,



A staff volunteer occupies the trailer at right when the pallet homes in The Dalles are in use. A list of rules are posted for those using the site. Mark B. Gibson photo

he said.

Two guests have received housing vouchers from the Mid-Columbia Housing Authority and "are searching for a permanent place to call home," LaPoint said.

Darcy Long-Curtiss is a The Dalles city councilor who also works as the on-site manager for the pallet home site. She won the initial grant that funded the pallet home project.

She noted she is speaking as an individual for this article, and not as a city councilor or on behalf of MCCAC.

"I believe the transition program will help our entire community in a number of

ways," Long-Curtiss said. "Formerly homeless people will have a higher quality of life. Those who are elderly or disabled will be able to focus on their health and other needs. It will be easier for those who are capable of working to find and maintain work with access to an address and a place to shower and wash their clothes as needed."

It will also improve things for neighbors who live around the St. Vincent de Paul office in downtown The Dalles, she said, which provides meals and other services for the homeless. (See related story, page 1.)

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